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Reconciling Seemingly Outrageous Figures

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Reconciling Seemingly Outrageous Figures

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Some of the numbers given in Vedic literatures seem too fantastic to be true. For example, the forty-first verse of chapter ninety of the tenth canto of *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* states:

tasraḥ koṭyaḥ sahasrāṇām aṣṭāśīti-śatāni ca
āsan yadu-kulācāryāḥ kumārāṇām iti śrutam

[In Dwarka] the Yadu family [had so many children] that they employed 38,800,000 teachers to educate them.

Quadrillions of Bodyguards

The next verse says *lakṣeṇāste sa āhukaḥ* — Maharaja Ugrasena had an entourage of thirty trillion attendants. In chapter ninety of Krishna Book, Srila Prabhupada gives an even more fantastic figure: "... it is said that King Ugrasena alone had ten quadrillion soldiers as personal bodyguards."

One quadrillion is equivalent to a thousand million millions — a one with 15 zeros following it. The world population today is estimated to be 7.148 billion persons. In other words, according to Srila Prabhupada, King Ugrasena had over than 100,000 times more personal bodyguards than the entire present population of the earth planet. And aside from that, there were also cooks, laborers, priests, housewives, children, soldiers, and the rest of a variegated population of Dwarka.

Regarding the number of personal servants of Maharaja Ugrasen, Srila Vishwanath Chakravarti Thakura offers an explanation in his commentary to the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 10.90.42 as follows:

atrāyutānām iti bahu-vacanaṁ kapiñjalādhikaraṇa-nyāyena. tritva-viśiṣṭāyāṁ saṅkhyāyāṁ paryavasāyitam ayutānām ayuta-lakṣaṇena bindu-trayodaśa-yuktena trayeṇa śaṅkha-trayeṇety arthaḥ. āsīd iti vaktavye āsta iti nitya-līlā-sphūrtyā uktam.

The plural in the term *'ayutānām'* should be understood according to the maxim of *kapiñjala-nyāya*. [The *kapiñjala-nyāya* says that whenever plural is used in context of numbers, it should be understood as the number 3]. Thus, the number here is 3 followed by thirteen zeros (30,000,000,000,000).

The present tense term *'āste'* (are) in this verse is used instead of the past tense *'āsīd'* (were) and this indicates that this great number is being spoken of by Srila Shukadev Goswami from the remembrance of the continuous ongoing *nitya-līlā* of the Lord [in Goloka Vrindavan, and not from the pastimes that happened on earth].

Unlimited Cows

What to speak of the cows of Vrindavan! In his purport to *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 10.12.2, Srila Vishwanath Chakravarti Thakur says that the number of Krishna's cows exceeded one followed by seventeen zeros. That's in the realm of one hundred quadrillion cows. And Visvanath says that was just the young calves, the older cows far exceeded that amount. In his commentary on *Bhāgavatam* 10.12.2, Srila Jiva Goswami explains:

evaṁ vatsānāṁ bālānañcānantyam uktam. itthaṁ vane bālaiḥ pālyamānānām api vatsānāṁ yadīyattā nābhūt tarhi vraje ruddhānām abhinavānāṁ tṛṇa-carāṇāṁ tathā go-saṅge gatānāñca mukta-stanyānāṁ vatsānāṁ tathā tan-mātṝṇām anyāsāñca gavāṁ tathā vatsatarīṇāṁ vṛṣāṇāñca śrī-gopāla-deva-prabhāveṇa nityaṁ vivardhamānānām iyattā katham āstām? mahiṣyādayaśca kena vā gaṇyā ity evam asaṅkhyeyāḥ paśavas tad-anusāreṇa gopa-gopyādayaś cānantā jñeyā.

> The boys and calves of Vrindavan together could not be counted. If the number of calves that they herded in the forest was beyond calculation, how many more calves must have been left back in Vraja--the small calves taking milk from their mothers, as well as the mothers of the calves that went to the forest, other cows, the elder male and female calves, the bulls, whose numbers kept increasing daily by the power of Gopal, and the buffalo as well? Thus the animals, cowherd and cowherd women were unlimited in number.

How do we understand such numbers? Are they exaggeration? Allegory?

Srila Vishwanath Chakravarti Thakur gives an answer in his *Sārārtha-darśini* commentary on *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 10.12.3:

na ca ṣoḍaśa-krośī-mātrasya vṛndāvanasya pradeśe tāvanto vatsāḥ naiva bhāntīti vācyaṁ bhagavad-vigrahasyaiva dhāmnaś cāsya tathāparimitatve 'py acintya-śaktyā vibhutvāt tat-pradeśaika-deśe 'pi pañcāśata-koṭi-yojana-pramāṇa-brahmāṇḍārbudānāṁ bhagavataiva brahmaṇe etat-uttarādhyāye darśayiṣyamāṇatvād ata evoktaṁ bhāgavatāmṛte,
evaṁ prabho priyāṇāṁ ca dhāmnaś ca samayasya ca
avicintya-prabhāvatvād atra kiñcin na durghaṭam. iti.

One should not argue however that such a large number of cows could not possibly fit into the thirty-two square mile area of Vrindavan, because the *dhāma* is unlimited by the inconceivable energy of the Lord. Even a small portion of the holy *dhāma* is sufficient to accommodate billions of universes each measuring fifty million miles in diameter. Krishna showed this to Brahma in a later chapter. The *Bṛhad Bhāgavatāmṛta* says there is no question of impediments, obstacles or limitations because the Lord, his associates, and his holy *dhāma* have inconceivable power (*acintya-śaktiḥ*).

Srila Prabhupada similarly writes in his purport to *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 10.12.3:

In this verse the words *kṛṣṇa-vatsair asaṅkhyātaiḥ* are significant. The word *asaṅkhyāta* means "unlimited." Krishna's calves were unlimited. We may speak of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, billions, trillions, tens of trillions, and so on, but when we go further to speak of numbers impossible for us to count, we are speaking of unlimited numbers. Such unlimited numbers are indicated here by the word *asaṅkhyātaiḥ*. Krishna is unlimited, his potency is unlimited, his cows and calves are unlimited, and his space is unlimited. Therefore he is described in Bhagavad-gītā as Para-brahman. The word brahman means "unlimited," and Krishna is the Supreme Unlimited, Para-brahman. Therefore, we should not consider the statements of this verse to be mythological. They are factual, but inconceivable. Krishna can accommodate an unlimited number of calves and an unlimited measurement of space. This is neither mythological nor false, but if we study Krishna's potency with our limited knowledge, that potency will never be possible to understand. *Ataḥ śrī-kṛṣṇa-nāmādi na bhaved grāhyam indriyaiḥ* [*Padma Purāṇa* quoted in *Cc. madhya* 17.136]. Our senses cannot perceive how he could keep an unlimited number of calves and cows and have unlimited space in which to do so.

Another example is found in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 10.33.38 which states *brahma-rātra upāvṛtte* — Krishna danced with the *gopīs* for an entire night of Lord Brahma. Krishna describes the length of Lord Brahma's day and night in *Bhagavad-gītā* (8.17):

sahasra-yuga-paryantam ahar yad brahmaṇo viduḥ
rātriṁ yuga-sahasrāntāṁ te 'ho-rātra-vido janāḥ

By human calculation, a thousand ages taken together form the duration of Brahma's one day. And such also is the duration of his night.

A thousand yugas together equals four million three hundred and twenty thousand years. The *Bhāgavatam* describes that the duration of those thousand yugas entered into a single twelve-hour night in Vrindavan during which the *gopīs* danced with Krishna. Srila Vishwanath Chakravarti Thakur compares this inconceivable expansion of time to the fact that many universes fit within the forty-mile range of earthly Vrindavan. Similarly, he says, one may consider how Mother Yasoda was unable to encircle the abdomen of her child Krishna using many, many ropes, or how on another occasion Krishna displayed many universes in his mouth to Mother Yasoda.

Srila Rupa Goswami writes in his *Laghu Bhāgavatāmṛta* (1.5.515):

ataḥ prabhoḥ priyāṇāṁ ca dhāmnaś ca samayasya ca
avicintya-prabhāvatvād atra kiṁ ca na durghaṭam

In Gokul, nothing is impossible for the Lord, the devotees, the abode, and everything in the abode, by the power of the Lord's inconceivable energy.

Evidences from the Puranas

Krishna, his devotees, and his abode are not in this material world and cannot be understood by the material senses. In his *Śrī Mathurā Māhātmya*, Srila Rupa Goswami cites many evidences from various *Purāṇas* regarding the unlimited glories of Vrindavan. In text fifty-one he quotes the *Ādi-varāha Purāṇa*:

ṣaṣṭhi-koṭi-sahasrāṇi ṣaṣṭhi-koṭi-śatāni ca
tīrtha-sāṅkhyā tu vasudhe mathurāyāṁ mayoditā

O Vasudha, I have manifested six-hundred-sixty billion holy places in Mathura.

In the next text Rupa quotes the *Mathurā-khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāṇa*:

bhūme rajāṁsi gananā kālenāpi bhaven nṛpa
māthure yani tīrthāni teṣāṁ saṅkhyā na vartate

O king, the particles of dust in this world may be counted in due course of time, but it is impossible to count the number of holy places that are present in Mathura.

Rupa Goswami declares atha *prapañcātītam* — "[This area of Mathura] is transcendental to the material world." he then quotes from the *Ādi-varāha Purāṇa*:

anyaiva kācit sā sṛṣṭir vidhātur vyatirekiṇī
na yat kṣetra-guṇān vaktum īśvaro 'pīśvaro yataḥ

Mathura is completely different from the creation of the creator, because even the controller of this world is unable to describe the unlimited qualities of this holy place. (text 121)

Vrindavan is Like a Lotus

Another perspective is given in the book *Prema-vilāsa* (chapter 16, texts 174 – 191), wherein the author Nityananda Das relates a conversation that he had with Srila Raghunath Das Goswami that took place while the two were at Radha-kunda:

Raghunath Das Goswami said, "While staying here and visiting the various pastime places, be careful not to commit any offense even in your mind. The pastimes of Krishna cannot be understood, but if you read the books of Srila Rupa Goswami then you will understand them. If you cannot hear about these subjects from the mouth of your guru then you should hear from persons in whom you have full faith, for by doing so you will become fixed in your mind. You should understand the different pastimes that Radha and Krishna are performing day and night in different places in Vrindavan. Although Radha and Krishna are always performing pleasure pastimes in Vrindavan, no one can perceive them. The amazing conjugal pastimes of Radha and Krishna are only understood by the gopīs."

Nityananda Das replied to Raghunath Das, "There is one doubt in my heart. If you give me your kind permission I will express it to you. My inquisitive mind has become blessed by hearing from your lotus mouth about Vrindavan.

"The distance between Vrindavan and the bank of Radha-kunda and Shyama-kunda is about eight *krośas* [a *krośa* is about two miles or three kilometers] and Govardhan is two *krośas* from the *kuṇḍas*. Sanketa is eight *krośas* from Vrindavan, Nandishwara is two *krośas* and Yavat is one *krośa*. Radha and Krishna travel between these places in a moment. How is it possible for Radha, Krishna, and their associates to travel such distances daily? For a long time I have had a desire to hear the answer to this question. Otherwise how can a *sādhaka* understand these pastimes?"

Mercifully, Das Goswami said, "Listen, Nityananda Das! Krishna's pastimes are always going on in these places. Through *śāstra*, Mahaprabhu has established that Vrindavan is just like a lotus flower.

mudita prakāśa haila dui ta prakāra
vilāse mudita hana līlāya vistāra

"As a lotus, Vrindavan is manifested in two ways, closed and open. It closes itself in pleasure, *vilāsa*; and opens itself in sport, *līlā*.

ei rūpe haya saba gamanāgamana
tadāśrita yei tāṅra haya ei mana

"In this way Radha Krishna and their associates come and go. Only those favored devotees of the Lord can understand this.

yogamāyā bale ihā ghaṭanā āchaya
yāṅhāra gamana sei kichu nā jānaya

"By the strength of *yogamāyā* one can understand these matters. Other persons cannot understand."

Conclusion

As unimaginably tiny creatures in this vast creation, the only way that we can hope to understand the inconceivable pastimes, abode and associates of the Lord are if they manifest themselves to us. Srila Prabhupada writes in chapter three of Beyond Birth and Death:

> According to *Brahma-saṁhitā* there are two ways of acquiring knowledge — the ascending process and the descending process. By the ascending process one is elevated by knowledge acquired by himself. In this way one thinks, "I don't care for any authorities or books. I will attain knowledge myself by meditation, philosophy, etc. In this way I will understand God." The other process, the descending process, involves receiving knowledge from higher authorities. *Brahma-saṁhitā* states that if one takes to the ascending process and travels at the speed of mind and wind for millions of years, he will still end up not knowing. For him, the subject matter will remain elusive and inconceivable. But that subject matter is given in *Bhagavad-gītā*: *ananya-cetāḥ*. Krishna says to meditate on him without deviation from the path of devotional service in submission. For one who worships him in this way —*tasyāhaṁ sulabhaḥ*: "I become easily available."

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